

Sermon on 18th October 2020

Exodus 33:12-end; Matthew 22:15-22

Lord, in your mercy, open our hearts and minds to your words. Amen!

“You have found favour in my sight!”, said God to Moses. Sounds great! But poor Moses often thought it was rather a challenge than a privilege, and he we see him in our reading today still struggling with his calling. That makes him arguing with God, demanding more support and proof – after all it was God who brought them all into this position, and Moses feels God should deliver on his promises: *“Consider too that this nation is your people.”*

God confirms patiently: *“My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”* What a lovely reassurance! If I had been Moses, I would have shut up at this point. But not so Moses. He keeps nagging, wants more, so God affirms again: *“I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favour in my sight, and I know you by name.”*

God can't say much more than that, can He? When He says: *“I know you by name”*, it means: ‘I know you inside out, I know every need, every fear, every doubt, every vulnerability of you, and I still love you, and I am on your side.’ Surely, what more can you ask for?

But that's still not enough for Moses, and pushing God even further, he requests: *“Show me your glory, please.”* Moses is craving for another sign, something tangible to disperse his doubts! Even this bold request is answered by God. But this time, a warning comes with it: *“But you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.”* This is putting Moses back into his box, and he surely realised again, that God is not simply a nice daddy who gives you a smile and a hug.

So finally, Moses did shut up. I love this story, since it is so close to what many of us might be feeling at times, wondering: ‘God, are you really there? Are you really supporting me? Please, give me a sign!’ But this is the best God can do without harming us: passing by very close. We need to treasure His assurance: *“My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest. I know you by name.”*

God knows us inside out. But do we really know Him? Do we recognise Him when He is passing by? Or are we so preoccupied by our own thoughts and worries, that we do not see Him when he passes by? But maybe we didn't look properly, because we didn't think He would be there? I think the actions of the Israelites were not so surprising – does it not happen to all of us occasionally, when we are going through tough times that we feel God is far away?

And that's where Jesus comes in. Since donkey's times, the people of God have known God's laws, and they knew about the prophets' encounters with God. But this was never enough for a doubting human soul. We have always been craving for more, just like Moses. God understands this, which is one reason why He sent Jesus, a human, just like us. That way we could meet God as close as possible, without taking harm. Jesus walked the earth and met us on eye-level.

I wonder whether those baddies in Jesus' time knew this somewhere in their wicked hearts, but they just could not bring themselves to admit it: it would have toppled their whole world view, their lives, their power, all they had! Nope.

Therefore they set traps for Jesus, so that he would fall and show what a weak human he actually is. But with Jesus, it didn't work like that: He made the rules, not they.

The baddies started the conversation with a flattery: *"Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, ... Tell us, then, what you think"* This lays it on thick, and the following question cuts right to the chase: *"Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"*

A clever question, which was pondered by many Jews in 1st century Palestine. They obviously resented the tax (who did ever like taxation?), but in Jewish eyes it was more than that: For Jews, God is the only King, and paying tax to an earthly king was to admit the validity of his kingship, and therefore an insult to God. So, if Jesus said 'Yes, it is lawful to pay the tax', he would instantly diminish his popularity, and it would be much easier for ruling priests to have him arrested.

However, if Jesus said 'No, it is not lawful to pay the tax', it would have been outright sedition, and the Romans would not have hesitated to throw him into prison. Oh, Jesus' interrogators knew what they were doing, and they thought they had him. You can imagine their smug grin.

But Jesus is not to be trapped on their terms. He calls them what they are: *'Hypocrites!'*; and starts turning the question around, to throw it back at them. *'Show me the coin used for the tax.'* And they brought him a denarius.' Do you know what a denarius looked like? It was made of silver, and it always showed the head of the current emperor as divine and a high priest. In Jesus' time, it was the head of the Emperor Tiberius. I imagine Jesus taking the coin with some disgust as every good Jew would, making a show of looking at it, and tossing it back, asking: *'Whose head is this?' 'The emperor's'*, they reply, stating the obvious, but admitting that they themselves actually carry this blasphemous coinage. 'Well then, says Jesus, you'd better pay the Emperor back in his own coin, right?' Which almost sounds a bit revolutionary: 'Paying the Emperor back in his own coin', but Jesus' words were innocent enough. He was not against paying the tax. A clever move. His challengers couldn't use this as an accusation against him. But it comes even better, since Jesus continues: ... and pay *'to God the things that are God's.'* Oops, that struck deep. Jesus' challengers were no fools, and instantly knew what he was saying in effect: 'You guys, are you sure you are paying God back his due? Have you really given your full allegiance to God?' Now the conversation became really uncomfortable for them, so they quickly scurried away. The clever trap had backfired.

Just to be clear: this story is not about the relationship between God and political authority, it is about being clear where our priorities are. It is surely the right thing to be a good citizen, following the rules and regulations that make possible our living together as a society. Only if political matters clash with the two greatest commandments as pronounced by Jesus in Matthew 22:37-40, it is then we need to stand up, and fight for what is right: social justice, good stewardship, peace. It is all about priorities. Are we indeed giving *'to God the things that are God's?'* 'Fear God. Honour the emperor.' (1 Peter 2:17)

Which brings me back to Moses and the Israelites, who, time and again, had to be reminded on the most important thing: *'the fear of the Lord'*. This term is used 134 times in the NRSV translation, and today's story of Moses gives us a good reminder: *'The fear of the Lord'* means that we need to give Him His due by following the two greatest commandments. And He will not let us down. He will pass by very closely, so make sure you don't miss it when He whispers: *"My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."* Amen.